

Madam Chairman, I am pleased that we are hosting this important hearing on a country that is pivotal to our national security. Our safety as a nation is closely linked to the fate of Afghanistan.

We stand with our Afghan brethren as they reject the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Sharia, Soviet communism and other various ills that have enslaved them for ~~the~~ last generation.

We stand with our Afghan brethren as they attempt to establish a decent standard of living, and reject terrorism and drug trafficking as a way of life. We join their efforts to allow women a full role in their society.

Madam Chairman, you and I have both traveled to Afghanistan at different times and have seen that country in different stages of development. I know that your concern for this country is an abiding commitment to freedom and democracy for a people that have seen neither for far too long - I share this view. I made my first trip there in the bad old days of Soviet occupation. It was an awful time then for that country. Now with our help, we know that we can help these people. More importantly, know that the success of the United States in the War on Terror is inextricably linked to the situation on the ground in Afghanistan. We know that if we succeed there, the pursuit of liberty is strengthened in other countries equally deprived. Afghanistan can be a showcase for the world. It can demonstrate that the way to advancement and freedom is through education, interaction and debate, and equality for all of Afghanistan's people. With the proper level of commitment, we can help assure that this is achieved.

For - these reasons and for all that we hope for Afghanistan, I am concerned about disturbing events in the country. One of the most important issues facing Afghanistan is the high level of poppy production that is - occurring - there. Some reports indicate that poppy production may comprise as much as one-third of GDP. We should also be concerned about reports that remnants of the Taliban are threatening farmers with death for not growing poppy. We should be alarmed by the resurgence of the Taliban in nearby Pakistan and their ability to traffic in drugs and weapons to finance themselves and their terror operations. I am also troubled by our apparent unwillingness or simple fear in using the -poppy-eradication tools at our disposal. Why has this option not been pursued and vigorously? Why can we not help those Afghan people who sincerely want to move on from the violence of the past? Continued poppy production must be decreased and because there appear to be methods to do so, we should use them in order to aid the Afghan people in their recovery and to lighten our own mission in the region. We owe this much to ourselves.

Further, I wonder if the insurgency is gaining or losing strength. Is the Taliban on the rise? Are NATO and the Europeans assisting development enough? Is the Karzai government strong enough to effect change in the country? These are vital questions. We need to know more what Afghanistan's neighbors like Pakistan are doing to curb the Taliban and the violence it precipitates. We also need to know what our allies are doing to help. If poppy production continues to increase, for example, it will be our allies in Europe, not to mention Central Asia that will suffer.

I am interested in hearing our witnesses' reports about what has become of our USAID projects, whether our money has been well spent and where major shortfalls are. What is our long-range plan for our aid to Afghanistan? We need to be assured that our plan is not an ad hoc procedure for the country but a sustained, well-thought out plan for reconstruction that will set the country on a path of peace and prosperity.

Madam Chairman, this subject is simply too critical to politicize or ignore. This is an important hearing and an even more important endeavor for our country. To the extent that I have any power to contribute on this subject, I will seek to not abandon Afghanistan as we did before. Thank you for agreeing to join me in this effort and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.